pastel shades. Less than sixty hours previously I had walked down Piccadilly in a mackintosh and made a shivering descent to the crowded Underground. The contrast provided one of those pleasant shocks that are all too rare in the average man's lifetime.

Being November, it was agreeably cool, although the sun blazed down from a hazy blue sky. One might have compared the scene with Camber sands on a hot day in June. As one walked down the pier towards the diminutive rest-house, the white coral houses of Dubai, which clustered on the shores of the creek, looked like Mediterranean villas; to the north, beyond the date groves and the fishermen's huts, the sands stretched flat and featureless towards the horizon. This, then, was to be my home.

As I sipped clove-flavoured coffee in the rest-house, and chatted to the passengers who were to continue the journey to India, I felt a momentary pang at being separated by so many thousand miles from the civilization I knew and liked. My nostalgia was short-lived. A traffic official sounded the small ship's bell and the passengers made their way back to the launch. In a few minutes the engines started up and the flying-boat roared down the creek, creating a cascade of foam before she left the water. She rose like a bird and was soon a speck in the sky.

The passengers gone, I had an opportunity of meeting some members of the small European staff of whom I was to be in charge at Sharjah. Apart from the coxswain, a six-feet Scot from Glasgow, whom everyone affectionately called 'Jock', there was a burly young Lancashire engineer, a traffic officer from Durban, and a radio officer. The others had remained at the Fort to attend to the land-plane services. I learned that I had, besides, a large Indian and Arab staff of clerks, bearers and coolies, many of whom resided inside the Fort.

Sharjah Fort was originally built to the design of Sir Christopher Turner, an Army engineer, in 1933, for defensive purposes. In those days there was no flying-boat base, and a handful of Imperial Airways employees lived under more primitive conditions in the wilderness of sand, their one concern being to attend to the twice or thrice weekly services of Hannibal land-planes which stopped at Sharjah to refuel. I had a long line of predecessors, beginning with Wade and Chance, Poynter and Clive Adams, who had pioneered the way and built up an efficient organization with little help from headquarters; it was my task to maintain this efficiency and cope

with the greatly-extended air services which had developed since those early days.

The radio officer came and reported that he had received the 'all clear' from the flying-boat. We locked up the rest-house, dismissed the serangs, and crowded into the two station wagons which were to take us the ten miles to the Fort. It was a tight squeeze, with bearers and clerks sitting on each others' knees in the back seat, but since transport is scarce in the desert, I found this was the customary way of travelling.

There was a track of sorts,* beaten out by the wheels of countless vehicles, which wound its way around the sand dunes and the date palms. In hot weather the desert is as hard as a macadam road, and one can drive almost anywhere, but in the season of the rains flooding is frequent, and once you get stuck in a soft patch nothing less than a four-wheel drive truck with a crane will get you out. So we stuck to the road and did a fairly comfortable thirty miles an hour through the most monotonous country I have ever seen. Fortunately the rest of the desert is not like this. Between Sharjah and Dubai the landscape is as flat as a table, and the sand a dun, muddy grey, without a single bit of scrub or camel grass to relieve it.

There was little activity on the road. A flock of black goats scattered as we drove past, the young herdsman casting us a scared glance. A fat merchant on a donkey, his bare legs almost touching the ground, trotted by, a dignified expression on his face which contrasted comically with his primitive mode of travel. Away to the dunes on our left, a train of loaded camels trudged majestically towards a Bedouin encampment, their riders carrying long, silver-chased rifles. Ahead there gleamed in the sun what looked like a wide, shallow lake. Our driver made straight towards it; as we advanced so it receded, and eventually it evaporated into the air. I have often heard it said that these mirages are due to heat reflection, but an old Arab whom I knew said they were caused by the salt crystals and silicates in the sand, which reflected the sun like a mirror. Science may not accept his theory, but I have often picked up large flakes of salt from the desert which sparkled like fragments of glass.

We approached the village of Khan, a small dependancy of Sharjah, whose minarets and white-walled houses appeared to float in the air like a fairy city—again the effect of a mirage. Five more miles and we skirted a high range of sand dunes and soon glimpsed the radio masts and white, crenellated walls of our fortress home. A mile behind it the dun stone walls of the sheikh's palace

*[Between Dubai and Sharjah, ca 10 miles apart -- Analyst]

and the tower-topped houses and mud huts of the town rose to view.

The fort gleamed dazzling white against a background of huts, tents and low stone quarters of the R.A.F. and Indian troops stationed at Sharjah. The massive iron doors in the south entrance, large enough to admit a fair-sized tank and painted silver with the legend 'British Overseas Airways' in letters of yellow-gold, were open. They had not been closed since the tribal war of 1940, and were rusted to the ground. One of my many minor tasks was to have them repaired and ready to shut at a moment's notice. Facing the entrance, and somewhat spoiling its imposing façade, were the shabby, coral-faced hutments of the R.A.F. Station Headquarters, with the U.S. Transport Command's meteorological building adjoining and, topping them, the square control tower shared by the two Allied forces. At the extreme end of this jumble of tattered offices was the U.S. latrine. It had been erected despite formidable opposition from the last Station Manager and, though in my opinion no worse an eyesore than the other domestic buildings, was hardly the type of edifice one would wish a V.I.P. to look at on leaving the imposing fort. But Americans are sanitary-minded, and we must bow to their idiosyncrasies.

Our convoy of cars swept into the courtyard and drove into the open garage. Before going to my quarters I met the Catering Officer, an excellent chef. Lambert had been in the desert for nearly two years, but dust, sand and blinding sun had not dimmed the delectable arts of the kitchen which he had learned at the Grand Hotel in Brighton or aboard Lady Yule's fantastically luxurious yacht. His job did not end with superintending the preparation of food; he was in charge of all food supplies, refrigeration plant, and the furnishing and maintenance of the quarters; he ruled the Persian bearers with a kindly but iron hand, and the fort garden was also his responsibility.

The garden, which was enclosed by a stone wall three feet high, and which one entered through an archway burgeoning with bougainvillea, must be one of the world's smallest. I do not think it could have measured more than fifteen feet by thirty feet, yet it was symmetrically laid out with cement paths and flower beds gay with pink and white *vinker*, a local type of stock. In the centre was a ship's cannon, dating from the George IV period, probably stolen by the Arabs from a pirated wreck. It had been presented to Station Manager Clive Adams by the Sheikh of Umm-al-Quain, or

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The Fort at Sharjah, during flood

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000 of the war, when certain types of aircraft were unreliable and pilots inexperienced in desert conditions. A hundred yards away, on a hill surrounded by barbed wire, was the English cemetery. Here, a dozen little white wooden crosses marked the last resting places of men who would never again see the green fields and lanes of Kent or Yorkshire. Overhead, in the hard blue sky, the vultures soared and on the rocks the lizards scurried from the shadows of their wings.

A rough track in the sand led to the tower; it had been made by American trucks, the drivers of which had been hunting gazelle
● 712 or houbari, the wild bustard. The tower,[1] which was about sixty feet high, was built of large stones cemented together with *juss*, the local mortar. Situated on the highest part of the sandhill, a view of at least twenty miles could be obtained from the crenellated top. At dusk the sheikh's Askhari guards would take their stand beside a little peep-hole in the walls, on the look-out for any raiders who might venture into Sharjah territory. In the daytime a round boulder, cunningly camouflaged with rags to look like a human head, would be affixed to the battlemented top, and the effect of this simple deception was most realistic. For several weeks I was convinced that an Arab sentry was on guard there, even when I inspected it through Zeiss field-glasses, and it was only when I climbed the tower with one of the sheikh's sons that I discovered the trick. These towers are a regular feature of every Arab town in Oman, and one sees scores of them dotted all over the landscape, looking rather like old Norfolk mills without their sails.

133 A high ridge of dunes rises gradually behind the tower, and
137 from the top of these one has an amazing view of the distant mountains. Gilded by the late afternoon sun, the peaks and passes assume changing colours, varying from deep purple to misty violet and terra-cotta pink. The desert beyond the dunes changes in character, due probably to the presence of subterranean streams, and one finds miniature *wadhis* and *nullahs* luxuriant with neam copses, and mossy banks where lush grass grows between tiny desert daisies and dandelions. In these banks I have found clumps of those edible fungi, the *fagar* and *tartuth*, both Arab delicacies, bushes of wild berries, and stunted thorn trees called, I believe, Spici Christi.

136 Unfortunately my knowledge of botany and zoology is abysmally limited, and I was unable to identify many species which were unfamiliar to me; as a scientific record of wild life in the Gulf

1 - [The Sheikh's watch-tower 5 miles east of Sharjah]

CHAPTER X

FROM the roof of the Fort one has a fine view of the surrounding desert. Due south-west the muddy creek curves like a snake past the little town of Khan, a dependency of Sharjah. Only the tops of the houses and the slender minaret are visible, since Khan is hidden by sand-dunes and an enchanting copse of date palms. The palm trees thicken as one looks further south, marking the beginning of the flourishing plantations which screen the town of Dubai, ten miles distant. Khan consists of about a hundred houses, and is ruled by a headman; the inhabitants are fishermen, pearl divers and sponge collectors. There is a very small boat-building industry, whilst some charming brass-bound chests are made there by native craftsmen; these chests are made of teak wood and are usually lacquered, after the Kuwait fashion. The sponge industry is unimportant and is confined to a few families. Men and women wade into the creek at low tide to collect the sponges, which are coarse and of an extremely poor grade. They cannot be exported and are used by the local Arabs.

Sharjah, a large rambling town of about 10,000 inhabitants, lies one mile north-west of the Fort, from which one has a fine view of the half-ruined fort, from one of the towers of which flies the sheikh's personal flag—a scarlet square with a wide white border. This fort, or 'palace', which lies at the back of the town, was built for strategic reasons with its gateway facing the open desert. The Khan Bahadur told me that it is about four hundred years old; the towers and the gateway were erected by the Portuguese, who established military and trading outposts on the Persian Gulf coast in the seventeenth century. Old ships' cannons, taken from the wrecks of British and French merchantmen, ornament the front of the fort; some bear the Admiralty anchor or the Royal insignia, G.R. III, and though rusty and time-worn, are still fired by the sheikh during tribal wars or on festive occasions.

The Persian Gulf was the haunt of pirates until almost the end of the nineteenth century, and the waters around Sharjah and Dubai were infested with these cruel and bloodthirsty sea-brigands,

and dunes of soft sand, but the approach is through a cool grove of palm trees, with gardens on either side. The houses and streets are neat and clean, the town being planned in four sections in the form of a cross. Each section is surrounded by gardens and palm plantations, with a high fence of palm leaf matting to shield it from the dust and wind. Raschid may be a wily rascal but he understands the basic principles of town planning and his town is an example of what can be done in the desert.

The desert track ended just outside the town, giving way to a wide road with a hard surface, suitable for any type of car. Green palm trees waved on either side of the road and the air was full of the song of birds. The bazaar lay to our left, on the seaward side, but we skirted this and rode straight ahead towards the palace. This is a large, imposing building, with great buttresses and cliffs of honey-brown sandstone rising straight out of the sand. Architecturally, it is one of the finest forts in Oman, with ramparts and crenellated towers resembling those of the crusaders' castles at Acre. The two large towers, facing south, and the bastions are of seventeenth century Portuguese design, and the pitted, battered walls are evidence of the turbulent history of this desert outpost, for the people of Ajman were once the most warlike of all the tribes.

We dismounted outside the main gateway, where Raschid bin Hamid, Hussein and other members of the court were waiting to greet us. This gateway, cut in a side wall, is small and rather insignificant, but no doubt it was built thus for strategic reasons. There is a larger gate on the west side, heavily barred and studded with brass nails, set in a thirty-foot wall, but this is never used. To the left of this gate the wall is overhung with a large veranda, with grilled and fretted windows; behind this lie the women's quarters and the harem.

There are some remarkably fine cannon outside the fort, varying from small bronze culverts of Portuguese origin, to twelve-pounders of Crimean vintage, still suspended on their original wooden wheels. The muzzles of small brass cannons bristle from the loopholes in the walls of the fort, but their use is purely decorative. An air of decay pervades the huge building and the sandy plaster is falling from the walls, but even in dilapidation it is extremely picturesque.

Sheikh Raschid shook hands and then embraced us in the Arab fashion, brushing our cheeks with his bearded lips, which smelt of perfume and tobacco.

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An ancient fortress in the Western Hajar mountains, once the home of the Sheikh of Kalba

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gives nitrogenous value to the soil. The subterranean channel rises to the surface in the middle of the plantation, where it is collected in a large cement reservoir; from this source the water, carefully controlled in volume, is conveyed by pipes and runnels into narrow ducts constructed at right-angles to the paths. Palm trees are very thirsty and require plenty of water in the hot weather.

A single *Askhari* guarded the plantation, which was noisy with the chatter of brilliantly-plumed birds; for our amusement he climbed a tall palm with the agility of a monkey, using a rope-sling as a support, and dexterously cut a bunch of male flowers for our inspection. The flowers, which have a sickly sweet smell, are tightly packed in a tough protective sheath; these sheaths are sold, when ripe, and used to pollinate the female palms. They are also edible, being very palatable when boiled and eaten with butter sauce. When, a few months later, I passed through Djaidh, the green dates were already forming, and labourers were high in the trees, tying veils of muslin around them to protect them from insects. The dates which are intended for export are gathered when they are light brown, that is, half-ripe, and are often packed with the stalk attached. The Arabs usually prefer them fully ripe, when the colour is dark brown; over-ripe dates are used for the manufacture of syrup which, when crystallized, makes a good brown sugar. Hives are often kept in the vicinity of the plantations and the air was full of their buzzing as we passed through the glades.

Before we reached the encampment we passed the ruins of an old fort. Nothing but the outer shell remained and the gateway had long since lost its magnificent doors; the walls were of rose-pink clay and mortar, and the crumbling tower was crenellated like the ramparts of a mediæval French castle. Sheikh Hamid told us that the fort originally belonged to his grandfather, Sheikh of Kalba, who at one time included Djaidh among his possessions; but a succession of tribal wars had decreased the influence of the Kalba clan and Djaidh had degenerated into neutral ground.

The road to the encampment was a mere body-wide track through tall grass, so high in places that we could not see ahead. Presently two little Arab boys, leading an emaciated bull, greeted us as the truck emerged from this forest and entered a wide, muddy river bed. Here we saw the first of the wells. A gang of labourers was busily letting down baskets into the main channel, while the tribesmen looked on. The headman, a fine-looking old Arab